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POINT OF VIEW, by Franklin Folsom

The nonsense side of CIA's files

"I MAY WANT to commit a crime some day, and I understand that a criminal is supposed to leave fingerprints at the scene." This was my explanation to the young woman in the police station when she asked why I wanted my prints.

The officer gulped, but on the chance that I might be the harmless white-haired old man I looked to be, she tried again. "Why do you really want them?"

I told her: "I've asked for my FBI file under the Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts. Although the bureau has long had my prints, it apparently feels insecure, even after I sent them all my past addresses, plus a sworn notarized statement saying I am who I say I am."

But perhaps the FBI really did doubt that I was the Folsom I claimed to be. I remember visitng the Department of Justice building about the time the United States entered the war against fascism. My mission was to persuade the department to release from Ellis Island one Ambrogio Donini, a distinguised professor of comparative religion at the University of Rome. He was being held on the pretext that he had a brother in the fascist Italian Navy. Ambrogio Donini did have a fascist brother, but Ambrogio himself was throroughly antifascist.

In time the "confusion" was resolved, and Ambriogio entered this country, where he edited an antifascist Italian language newspaper. But the day I was in the Justice building on his behalf, I saw what I assumed was a stage prop left ostentatiously on a desk I would have to pass: a fat folder labeled "Frank Folsom."

Was the Justice Department or the FBI accustomed to leaving folders about citizens laying around this way? Or was there some fellow whose name resembled mine? In due course I found that one Frank Folsom was serving as chief procurement officer for the Navy Department. (He later rose in the world to become head of Radio Corporation of America, while I had sunk to being a freelance writer.) The FBI might have been asked to take a look at someone who had massive government funds to spend, particularly if the FBI was inclined to get him mixed up with Franklin Folsom.

I, after all, was pretty obviously a dangerous character. From 1937 through 1942 I served as executive secretary of the League of American Writers, whose 800 members had prodded the government to do this or that, even during the two years when Franklin D. Roosevelt and Katherine Chapin, the wife of Attorney General Francis Biddle, were among the 800.

FROM WHAT I have managed to get of my FBI file (297 photocopied pages), I have learned much about myself that I did not know — for instance, that I sometimes go under the name of Benjamin Webster. (Had someone heard that I wrote several children's books under the name Benjamin Brewster?)

I am also known to the FBI, although to no one else, as Fred Franschi. I must remember to write the family of the late Frank Folsom and ask if he ever used those names.

The file reveals that it was "Confidential Informant "T-2," a person "of unknown reliability," who originally put the name Benjamin Webster into my record — where it is later repeated as a fact to be relied on without any reference to its dubious origin.

My file also registers that I lived exactly where my printed stationery and the telephone directory said I lived. How much this information cost the taxpayer, no one will ever know. Many different informants, surely drawing different pay checks, came up with the same data. That was one thing the FBI had straight.

AT LEAST 30 "confidential informants," some identified by such symbols as "N" or "200" and others as "T-1," "T-2," and so on through "T-25," sent in reports about me to supplement the researches of an undetermined number of special agents.

Not only did I find in my file their reports about myself, but I also got one startling bit of news about my wife of more than 40 years. She, it seems — totally without my knowledge or her own — had taught for three years (one informant said five years) in the Communist Workers School. Clever woman.

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